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Tyler, Annie B. (Mrs.)

Thomas Hansford, first native
martyr to American liberty.



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THOMAS HANSFORD,

First Native Martyr to American Liberty.

*A paper read before the Virginia Historical Society
Tuesday, December 22, 1891,*

BY

B.
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Williamsburg, Virginia.

Two *Spiralis* for pax 195 No 222 are beside
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Virginia tour 1757 - 1758



THOMAS HANSFORD,

THE

First Native Martyr to American Liberty.

In a list prepared by Sir William Berkeley, and preserved among the Harleian MSS. in the British Museum, enumerating the persons who were executed by him in the seventeenth century for participating in Bacon's Rebellion, occurs the name of one Thomas Hansford, who is described by Sir William as "a valiant, stout man," and "a most resolved rebel."¹ The few other references to Hansford in the current accounts² of the times are in harmony with this description, and justify a natural desire to be still further acquainted with him.

Thus are we told that he commanded at Jamestown, under a commission as major from Nathaniel Bacon, Jr., and was there when Berkeley returned from his exile to the Eastern Shore at the head of six hundred, or, as another account has it, one thousand followers. It is said that he took a conspicuous part in the insurrection, brilliant as it was brief, and when he was captured after Bacon's death, he supplicated no other favor than that "he might be shot like a soldier, and not hanged like a dog." We are also told that during the short respite allowed him after his sentence, "he professed repentance and contrition for all the sins of his past life, but refused to acknowledge what was

¹ Neill's *Virginia Carolorum*.

² Accounts by "T. M.," Anne Cotton, &c.

charged against him as rebellion to be one of those sins, desiring the people present to take notice that he died a loyal subject and lover of his country, and that he had never taken up arms but for the destruction of the Indians, who had murdered so many Christians.'"

St. George Tucker, my revered father, trusting to the statement found in one of the quaint old tracts rescued from oblivion by the indefatigable antiquarian, Peter Force, which ascribes his arrest to the fact that "although a son of Mars, he did sometimes worship at the shrine of Venus," made Thomas Hansford the hero of a romance³ in which the gentle Virginia Temple was the innocent cause of his undoing.

When I recite the personal history of Hansford, and disclose the fact that he was a married man, it will probably occasion some surprise that he should have been represented as an ardent suitor at the time of his execution, but the truth is, that until a recent date there was very little reality surrounding Hansford's career. Nor was he an exception among the characters of the period in which he figured. How few and scant are the published facts concerning another of Bacon's officers, Major Edmund Chisman, and his noble wife, who took upon herself the entire blame of his sedition; or of Major Thomas Whaley and "thoughtful Mr. Lawrence," who when the cause was abandoned plunged into the snows of the unknown backwoods and were lost to the knowledge of their fellow men. The old published chroniclers tell us very little of Bacon himself, and yet, thanks to recent investigations in the county records and the British archives, the material is now abundant for a full account.

In the same manner careful research has added many new facts to the current account of Thomas Hansford, and the only merit of this paper is that it will attempt to present these facts in a connected narrative.

In 1651, Richard Hansford was granted a patent for lands at West's creek, in York county, and among the head rights were John and Elizabeth Hansford. In 1658, Mr. John Hansford entered land in the same locality; and in 1662, Thomas Hansford

³ Thomas Hansford: A tale of Bacon's Rebellion, published by Geo. M. West, Richmond, Va., 1857; republished after the war by a Philadelphia firm, under the title "The Devoted Bride."

obtained a re-grant for the same. In 1653, John Hansford obtained a grant for 950 acres in Gloucester county, north of the narrows of Mattaponi, and among the head rights were John and Elizabeth Hansford. The probability is that Richard Hansford was a brother of John Hansford, who was the father of Thomas, mentioned as taking out the patent in 1662 for John Hansford's land on West's creek.⁴

John Hansford might have been a son of the merchant tailor of London of the same name mentioned by Mr. Alexander Brown in his "Genesis," as entered in a list of the Virginia Company in 1620, and who was probably brother of Sir Humphrey Hanford, Handford, or Hanforth, as the name is variously written.

There is no question, however, that the John Hansford of the patents and the John Hansford who was father of the Hansford of history, were one and the same person. He lived on the same creek and in the same county, and was for many years active in the affairs of York county,⁵ and in 1655 occupied a seat on the Justices' Bench. His will was proved November 24, 1661, and judging from the number of servants and the amount of silver plate, and other property mentioned in his inventory, recorded June 24, 1668, he was a man of both wealth and position. According to his will he left four sons—John and William, to whom he devised a plantation in Gloucester county, upon the "Clay bank" on the north side of York river, and Thomas and Charles, to whom he left 650 acres at the head of Felgate's creek, in York county. He had also three daughters—Elizabeth, who married first Mr. Christian Wilson and afterwards Mr. Randolph Holt,⁶ of Surry county; Mary, who married Dr. Thomas Robins, of Robins' Neck, in Gloucester county, and whose family history is given by Mr. Stanard in the "Richmond Critic" for August, 1889; and Margaret, who is supposed to have been dead before October, 1667.

⁴ See Register in Land Office.

⁵ John Hansford appears as an inhabitant of Chiskiack, subsequently called Hampton Parish, in York county, as early as 1647.

⁶ See Randolph Holt's receipt to Mr. Lockey, October 20, 1663, York Records. [The name is sometimes rendered Randall Holt—ED.]

By the will of Mr. Hansford we are shown another important fact, which is that one Robert Jones was the instructor of his children; and it is not a little remarkable that a man of that name is mentioned by Henning as among those executed with Thomas Hansford for rebellious proceedings.⁷

Thomas Hansford, the third son of Mr. John Hansford, was born about 1646, as I infer from his deposition, dated January 9, 167½, which states that he was then twenty-five years old. He came into possession of his property, both real and personal, November 12, 1667, and the order states that "he was then of age."

After his father's death he was under the guardianship of Mr. Edward Lockey, a rich merchant of Virginia, largely interested in the tobacco trade, who had married Mrs. Hansford, the mother of Thomas, on October 10, 1661. Both were dead before the disturbances under Bacon arose. Mr. Lockey died before February 24, 1667, and Mrs. Lockey before January 24, 167 5-6, these being the respective dates of the recording of their wills.⁸

Notwithstanding the testimony of Romance, which represents Thomas Hansford as a single man at the time of his execution, we find the court, on April 10, 1667, entering an order against Mr. John Roberts, guardian of Mistress Elizabeth Jones, daughter of Richard Jones,⁹ deceased, to deliver his ward's estate in kind to Thomas Hansford as intermarrying with the said Elizabeth." This Elizabeth had two brothers, Gabriel¹⁰ and Richard, but they soon died without issue and she became sole heiress of her father's property, thus bringing a considerable fortune to her husband.

Hansford's marriage occurred nine years before Bacon's Rebellion, and his family at that time was of considerable figure, consisting of a wife and five children.

During these nine years we catch an occasional glimpse of him in the courts. A deposition, in June, 1668, declares that

⁷ Henning, Vol. II, p. 550.

⁸ York county records.

⁹ Richard Jones' will proved 12 November, 1660.

¹⁰ Will proved January 10, 1670.

passing by the cow-pen he tauntingly bid "Ann Huddlestons Dame" to go and rob the onion patch again. "Can you prove your words?" she indignantly said. "Yes," was the reply. He was sued for defamation of character. After the same manner, he accused Dr. William Townsend of purloining from Squire Digges's old field a foal which he himself had branded for Digges. In another suit he won 200 pounds of tobacco from Abraham Ray for damages done his (Hansford's) horse. And Thomas Reade, his servant, who ran away, was required by the court to make equivalent service for the cost and trouble of his capture.

The uprising of the people at the call of Nathaniel Bacon, Jr., summoned Hansford to more serious controversies; but here, I regret to say, we cannot add much to what is already familiarly known. We are aware that many of the leading gentry adhered to Governor Berkeley, but not all, as in York county both Thomas Hansford and Major Edmund Chisman were trusted officers of Bacon, who was himself of the ancient house of Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam. Certain, it is, that both sides plundered and pillaged private estates, and a guerrilla warfare prevailed through all the colony. Hansford, according to Robert Beverley,¹¹ was commander-in-chief of four counties and president of the Court of Sequestrations. Probably it was while engaged one day in looking up the sequestered estate of a Royalist that he met up with the gallant Captain William Digges, eldest son of Colonel Edward Digges, of Bellfield, in York county, and in a single handed fight with him was so unfortunate as to lose one of his fingers. Digges forced him to fly, but the tables were turned shortly after, and Digges had himself to flee to Maryland for safety. The writer of the MS.¹² from which this fact is gleaned adds that "for her son's loyalty his mother (Mrs. Elizabeth Digges) suffered considerably in her estate."

I do not propose to give a history of the Rebellion. Just at the time when Virginia acknowledged no other authority than Bacon's, he was taken ill and died, and thus the cause which he

¹¹ Hening's Statutes, Vol. III, p. 567.

¹² In Virginia State Library.

represented received a fatal blow. Berkeley re-established his authority as rapidly as he had lost it. Some of the lieutenants of Bacon were hanged, others died in prison, and others left the colony. Hansford was one of those who suffered the first-mentioned fate, and is said to have been the first native Virginian that perished in that ignominious form, and the first martyr that fell in defending the rights of the people. His execution took place in Accomac.¹³

From June, 1676, the beginning of the conflict, to March, 167⁶/₈, when the end had come, there appears to have been no court held in York county, as far as the records testify. Bacon had compelled the justices, in the celebrated meeting at the Middle Plantation, to administer to the people the oath of allegiance to his cause; and in a letter dated February 17, 167⁶/₈, they now besought the Governor to "indemnify" them by name for obeying the mandate, and to indicate "who should be justices for York county."

The Governor, on March 23d, immediately re-appointed all except John Scarsbrooke, whose case was reserved for the decision of the Council on account of suspicions, connecting him with the rebellion. And on March 31st, he further ordered that the sessions of the county court should be held "in the house lately belonging to Thomas Hansford, whose estate for his rebellion and treason is forfeited to his sacred Majesty."¹⁴ So said Governor Berkeley, but it appears, however, that the property of Thomas Hansford was not confiscated. In spite of a formal petition (addressed to the commissioners sent over from England to enquire into the late disturbances) by the justices of York county, John Page, John Scarsbrooke (lately restored), James Vault, Otho Thorpe and Isaac Clopton, that the property of Hansford should be seized for a courthouse, the want of which in the county had annually imposed a heavy burden in the way of rent upon the people, the commissioners, with a humanity which did them credit, reported to the king in favor of bestowing the

¹³ He was captured by Major Robert Beverley, at the house of Colonel George Reade, deceased, situated where Yorktown now is. Colonel Reade had been a member of the Council.

¹⁴ York county records.

property of Hansford and "those other wretched" men lately associated with him upon "their poor wives and children."¹⁵ And this was doubtless the explanation why, on November 13, 1678, "a commission of administration on the estate of Mr. Thomas Hansford was granted to Mr. Charles Hansford and Mr. David Condon in behalf of ye decedent's children, &c."

Previous to this the same parties had qualified on the estate of Mrs. Thomas Hansford, who within a year had followed her martyred husband to the grave.

An agreement, dated February 26, 1677-'78, was made between the administrators and the justices representing the county, by which the house "lately belonging to Mrs. Hansford" was leased to the county for one thousand pounds of tobacco per annum—an arrangement which continued until January 20, 1679-'80, when the place of adjournment was changed to the "French Ordinary," not far distant on the York road, half way between Williamsburg and Yorktown.

¹⁵ The petition of the Justices ran as follows: "And whereas Thomas Hansford suffered death as a traitor and thereby forfeited his Land to the King, the Court humbly prays the seventy acres of Land given him by his ffather's will to build a courthouse for the use of the said county forever, having been formerly forced to pay 4000 lb. of Tob yearly, w'ch hath been very burthensome to the county.

(Signed,)

"JOHN PAGE,
"JOHN SCARSBROOKE,
"JAMES VAULX,
"OTHO THORPE,
"ISAAC CLOPTON."

On which the commissioners reported:

"We humbly hope that his Majesty will be gratuitously pleased to give the Estate of these wretched men to there poore wives and children, w'ch will be an act of great mercy."

A petition from the inhabitants of another county prayed that "this present grand assembly would make an act of oblivion that no person may be Injured by the provoking names of Rebels, Traitors and Rogues." To which the commissioners, Sir John Berry, Colonel Herbert Jeffreys and Colonel Francis Morrison, added: "We Joyne w'th the Petitioners herein to his Majesty that noe pretence may obstruct the obtaining and good effect of it, and thus wee have layd it most humbly before his Ma'ty as a most likely means to secure the quiet of his s'd Colony." MSS. in Virginia State Library.

Of the children of Thomas Hansford, John was afflicted and died in 1681. Elizabeth married Richard Burt, Mary married William Hewitt, and Thomas and William married and died in York county leaving descendants.

The will of Thomas Hansford's son, William Hansford, was recorded July 24, 1709, and mentions a wife, Mary, who seems to have been a sister of David Morce, called in the will "brother-in-law," and three sons, William, Thomas, and David, and one daughter, Elizabeth, all under age.

The will of the other son, Thomas, was recorded June 20, 1720, and his children were Thomas and William, Elizabeth, Sarah, Mary, and Martha Hansford. William died in 1733, and left a wife, Mary, and son, Lewis who had four sons living in 1765.¹⁶ Mary Steele, in her will proved in York county court, July 20, 1767, calls Lewis Hansford her son-in-law. Thomas was living in 1736.¹⁷

Charles Hansford, youngest brother of Major Thomas Hansford, married Elizabeth Moody, daughter of Rev. Edward Foliott, of Hampton Parish, and relict of Josias Moody, son of Dr. Giles Modé, a Frenchman, whose name was corrupted into Moody, and who is the founder of that family in Virginia. He left, in 1702,¹⁸ three sons, Charles, William and John, and four daughters, Elizabeth and Mary Hansford, Lydia Duke, wife of "Mr. Henry Duke," and Martha, who married Samuel Hill. Of these John long kept an ordinary at the half-way house between Williamsburg and Yorktown. Charles Hansford, the second¹⁹ of that name, had issue, a daughter Lucy, who married John Hyde, and a son also, named Charles. The third Charles lived till 1778, and on the 21st December, 1778, his

¹⁶ Dr. Lewis Hansford, of Norfolk, was alive in 1805.

¹⁷ Thomas Hansford, of Elizabeth City, married Hannah, daughter of John Davis, and a granddaughter of John R. Davis (who died in 1784), a lieutenant in the State navy during the Revolution. On 18th December, 1784, a Thomas Hansford obtained a license in York county to marry "Elizabeth Lilburne, widow."

¹⁸ Charles Hansford's will was proved July 24, 1702.

¹⁹ Charles Hansford's will was proved June 15, 1761. The York county records mention Charles Hansford and Susannah his wife executors of Joseph Wade.

will was proved in York county court. He left two sons, Richard and Benjamin, and three daughters—Elizabeth or Betsy, who in 1769 married²⁰ John Camm, the treasurer of the College of William and Mary, and afterwards president of the same; Mary, who in July, 1775, married²¹ Rev. Samuel Sheild, minister of Drysdale parish, in Caroline county, and Martha, who married Edward Harwood, and subsequently Robert Sheild, of York county, brother of said Samuel, and great-grandfather of William H. Sheild, M. D., assistant physician at the Eastern Lunatic Asylum.

As to the Gloucester branch of the Hansford family, William, elder brother of Major Thomas Hansford, had a son William living there in 1706.²²

The Hansford blood mingles with that of the Pattesons, Camms, Hydes,²³ Hills, Custises, and many other well-known families in Virginia to-day.²⁴

This ends my paper. Genealogical investigations, though necessarily personal, are nevertheless valuable. A people without pride in their past are no people at all. And I cordially echo the sentiment expressed by Professor Garnett in his excellent paper read last night: "Perish the day when the son forgets the father."

ANNIE TUCKER TYLER.

²⁰ *Virginia Gazette*.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² York county records. Petsoe Parish Vestry-Book.

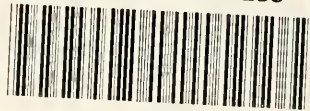
²³ Dr. John Hansford Hyde died in Lexington, Va., April 1, 1851. Captain Robert Hyde served in the Revolutionary army as an artificer; came to Richmond in 1788.

²⁴ Charles Hansford, at present living in Williamsburg, is descended from Charles, brother of Major Thomas Hansford. His father was Benjamin Hansford, who married Sarah Wynne; grandfather, Richard Hansford, who married Lucy Dudley Haynes.

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